

FOREST FIRE OF '47

A Story by Rosalie MacEachern

Original Document: Printed in u/k publication (newspaper). Photocopy.

Document Owner: Mrs. Betty Webber, Cape George, Nova Scotia

Transcribed by: Susan Smith, Cape George, Nova Scotia. February, 2016

The source of facts for this story is a diary kept by my granduncle, the late Cameron MacEachern, of South Side Cape George. In this diary, he gives a detailed and day-to-day account of the forest fire of 1947 which lasted five weeks, ranging over an area of 15,000 acres, sweeping Cape George from "coast to coast," destroying wood lands and threatening homes and families.

Monday, (August 11, 1947) dawned a beautiful day in the peaceful village of Cape George. It was pleasantly warm with a moderate breeze from the west. The past month had been exceedingly dry with no rain since the eighth of July.

There had been little snow the previous winter and consequently the forest floor was tinder dry and gardens and crops suffered from the extreme drought.

Around noon that day, people noticed heavy smoke rising towards the west in the Georgeville area. It seemed that a forest fire had broken out in this heavily wooded area between Cape George and Georgeville. The woods there were filled with slash from extensive lumbering operations.

Anxious residents immediately set off to investigate the smoke and found that apparently, the fire had started on the east side of the Glee Road. The blaze, fanned by west winds, was sweeping toward Lakevale and Cape George. By nightfall it had reached the Backsettlement and Beaver Roads, where there was a shortage of water.

After dark the men of the area gathered by MacInnis Brook to discuss the situation. The county ranger, George MacChesney, and the parish priest, Reverend A.I. MacAdam were there also to help make plans for combating the red menace.

After consultation, everyone returned to his home to spend an anxious night for the glow from the west flared up at times and it was frightening.

By morning the fire had crept through the hardwood on the south bank of MacInnis Brook and some families prepared to evacuate their homes. As further safeguards against the fire, ladders were placed on the roofs of buildings and every available dish was filled with water and placed nearby. The fire continued to blaze.

By Wednesday, the blaze was moving rapidly toward the properties of Archie MacKenzie and Eddie MacEachern. With the help of a large bulldozer and hundreds of feet of hose, volunteers were able to steer the blaze away from these homes.

The next morning the fire flared up along the Backsettlement Road at Graham's Bridge. Lines of hose were laid from a nearby brook and the men anxiously sprayed the buildings of John M. MacEachern, Dr. Chisholm, and Harry Bailey. The wind shifted and the fire miraculously passed between the Bailey and MacKenzie homes, going on to the shore.

Despite a few days of light showers the fire continued to rage. One prong of the fire swept toward the home of William Delaney, and another burned through Dr. Chisholm's woodlot at the south end of Harden's Mountain. The fire was gaining momentum.

The firemen worked diligently for nine days against the fire and yet it was not quelled. Fire was breaking out everywhere. It was mystifying how the new fires began since the nearest blaze was more than three quarters of a mile away and there had been no wind in their direction for days.

As the fire raced skyward, burning through slash and spruce, men and trucks gathered around Leonard MacPhee's, Cameron MacEachern's and the schoolhouse. The buildings

were sprayed and a pump was set up at Wilkie's brook in an attempt to prevent the fire from crossing the road.

Blazes between the Backsettlement and Beaver Roads were still burning out of control while the fire at Graham's Bridge swept over the interval behind John and Hugh MacEachern's.

A sudden call was issued for all men and equipment to rush to John M. MacEachern's house, which had caught fire. It was extinguished promptly when unexpectedly Hugh "Teacher" MacEachern's barn burst into flames. Everyone was shocked. The building had been sprayed but a spark must have gotten inside. The barn was destroyed along with the summer's crop of grain and hay, a supply of lumber and a newborn calf. The house also caught fire but was extinguished within seconds. It was late evening before the danger had passed. A wind from the northeast had brought drops of rain.

The men trudged homeward and the fact that they had lost their first building weighed heavily upon their hearts.

The fire continued its course into the second week. Even with light showers, it was impossible to put out the smoldering fire for many of them had gone underground into the stumps and roots of trees. Everyone was most discouraged. Many of the blazes, assumed to be extinguished, were again active.

By the end of August the fire had swept Cape George from "coast to coast". Although the situation was improved somewhat in the Georgeville area, the fire was rushing hungrily toward Ballantyne's Cove and the Marsh Road.

By now the exhausted firefighters remembered reading about and discussing the Pleasant Bay fire that had appeared in the papers previously. They had remarked then that it must be dreadful and then the conversation changed to fishing and then was forgotten entirely. Little did they know that they would experience the horror at first hand and learn that it would not be so easily forgotten.

During all this time the women were doing their share to win this battle too. Every day they prepared lunch at Dr. Chisholm's and Leonard MacPhee's. Trucks brought the lunch to the woods and it was comforting for the men to sit for a few minutes with a cup of tea.

September had arrived and the situation was worse instead of better. A strong northwest wind had given the fire new life, threatening the homes of Mrs. Ernest Ballantyne, Leonard MacPhee, Alex Adams and Cameron MacEachern.

Although the fires were out of sight in many places over the mountain, the cinders were falling like snowflakes. There was a strange, deadly beauty to the red-gold flames leaping skyward in the night.

At 2 a.m. (September 4) everyone was awakened by the glorious sound of rain coming down in torrents. The rain helped and the men were sure the fire was almost over. However, their hopes were premature.

The fires overpowered them once again. Over one hundred men were out fighting. They came with trucks from Livingston's Cove, Morar, Georgeville, Cape George Point, Ballantyne's Cove, and Cape George. Lakevale, West Lakevale, Morristown, and even from Antigonish and Monastery.

The fires raged on into the twenty-ninth day – twenty-nine days of heat, smoke, sweat, toil and flies. Yes, even flies. There was a real plague of them on the evening of the twenty-ninth. They were everywhere, getting into one's eyes and even into the tea. Everyone hoped and prayed that this was a sign of rain.

When the rains did come the people felt like Moses did when God sent him manna in the desert. It rained for two days. Surely God had answered their prayers – the fire must be out.

It was now September 16, five weeks since the fires began. The threat was over. A little smoke could be seen here and there, but the danger had passed.

Despite much hardship, everyone had much to be thankful for. Their homes, though threatened time and time again, had all been spared. With all the trucks on the go here and there through the weeks and on narrow roads, there had not been a single accident and no one hurt.

It had been quite a five-week ordeal. It was estimated that the fire ranged over an area of fifteen thousand acres. It left the woods a scene of desolation, ugly and charred and still smoking faintly.

The weary men found it difficult now to recall how they had spent their days before this business of fire fighting began. What a placid existence it had been then – nothing to occupy their minds but the price of garden seed, the market for fish, and petty quarrels between neighbors.

The fire had changed everyone. A spirit of co-operation had developed among the people of Cape George during this fire and they would need to maintain it for the winter facing them. Their gardens and crops had been lost along with a great deal of wood for their winter's fuel.

They had conquered one menace and now readied themselves to face another – the cold winter months.